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How the secret—many fingers on the button—has been preserved.

Delegation (III)

The 1964 election campaign was unusual in focusing primarily on foreign policy—two issues in particular. One of these, of course, was whether to escalate in Vietnam. But the number one issue of the campaign was the control and use of nuclear weapons, in Europe and in Vietnam.

At an early point in the campaign, Goldwater, who was both a Senator on the Armed Services Committee and a Reserve Major General in the Air Force, said that small nuclear weapons could be used effectively in Vietnam, for example “to blow the leaves off trees.” He was referring to the notion of “defoliation,” clearing foliage away from roads to reduce the likelihood of ambush, and opening the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos to more effective bombing attacks. In the next few years the U.S. used chemical toxins, forbidden for use in the U.S., to kill foliage covering X% of South Vietnam, an area equal in size to ----- . That got little attention or protest in the U.S., till U.S. soldiers with lasting side effects from Agent Orange, won disability payments many years later. (The heritage in Vietnam is -----). It would have been hard for the U.S. to defend against a charge of “disproportionate” means in a Nuremberg-type tribunal, though, of course, there was no danger of such a proceeding.

But the earlier, simpler proposal by Goldwater in the campaign of '64 to use nuclear weapons for this purpose had a clear enough ring of madness to it to catch the attention of the voting public. It cost him dearly.

He later tried to downplay that particular notion, but he gave great attention to a

proposal that the President should delegate to major field commanders like CINCEUR in Western Europe the authority to use “small, conventional (sic) nuclear weapons” on their own initiative.

President Johnson happily accepted this challenge and moved it to first place among the issues of the campaign. Traditionally, the Democratic presidential campaign started officially on Labor Day in Detroit. Johnson made the issue of presidential command of nuclear weapons the main subject of his speech on that day, the opening speech of his campaign. He derided the notion that there was any such thing as a “conventional” nuclear weapon. The tactical weapons Goldwater was calling “small,” he pointed out, averaged the size of the weapon that destroyed Hiroshima. He arranged that week for McNamara to give background briefings on this subject at the Pentagon.

The issue of whether and when to use such weapons was the most serious responsibility that any president was charged with, Johnson pointed out. Under the law, it was his responsibility alone. He never had, and he never would delegate that decision to anyone. [use QUOTES]

After I read that, I told Adam Yarmolinsky, the Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, about Eisenhower’s letters of delegation and JFK’s choice to renew these. (Yarmolinsky was coordinating answers to Goldwater’s charges relating to defense. I had written for his use a long critique of Goldwater’s absurd claim that the Soviet Union had pulled ahead of the U.S. in strategic military capability). I told him that Goldwater’s proposal went beyond this delegation because Goldwater would have given the theater commanders the authority to use tactical nuclear weapons on their own unconditionally, regardless of whether or not the President was functioning and in communication. But, I

said, LBJ's flat statements that he had not and would not delegate under any circumstances were inconsistent with the secret authorization by Eisenhower that JFK had tacitly continued. Had LBJ withdrawn that authorization?

Yarmolinsky didn't know. He suggested I try to find out. I visited the Joint Staff that afternoon and before long received the answer. The delegations were still in force. They had never been withdrawn or significantly changed. I would have preferred to hear that LBJ had withdrawn them, as his speech had indicated. It was more obvious in 1964 than in 1961 that there wasn't any urgent military need for such delegation, and the tone of seriousness about nuclear weapons in LBJ's speech sounded as good to me as it did to the public.

It would have made good sense by 1964 to rescind the delegation even from a military point of view. Since 1957 when Eisenhower had issued those letters, and even since 1961 when I had reported the situation to Bundy, communications with the theater commanders had become much more reliable, with satellites and better submarine cables, reducing the incentive for any delegation. Moreover, the proof by the fall of 1961 that there was no missile gap, no Soviet capability for a disarming surprise attack and no effort to acquire it, pointed even more importantly in the same direction. A plausible need for accepting the obvious dangers of delegation or a hair-trigger alert had virtually vanished, as had the basis for our program of a thousand land-based missiles. (None of these was actually reconsidered, at a time when forestalling by inspected agreement the actual development of a comparable Soviet posture was still possible.)

Nevertheless, in face of Johnson's denunciation of Goldwater's proposals, Goldwater arranged for a blue-ribbon panel of retired generals and admirals to support them.

[QUOTE the Twining Panel, and leaks in Time and US News and World Report]

Did Johnson know about the secret letters? Did he know that his speech was seriously misleading? Did Yarmolinsky alert him to that, after our conversation? I didn't know. In fact, I had no information on that for many years (until Sy Hersh was informed in 19-- that LBJ had renewed the policy, as had Nixon and Carter: see below). It was only in 2010 (CHECK) that a document surfaced that answered the question. It turns out that at the same time I was warning Yarmolinsky that the president was coming close to defrauding the public in the campaign, McGeorge Bundy, the president's assistant for national security, was giving his boss the same warning. [QUOTE]

Meanwhile, the hoax of the false "difference" between the two candidates was sustained by both of them. Senator Goldwater, major general in the Air Force, almost surely did know about the delegation letters. If he hadn't known before, after Johnson's speech one of Goldwater's colleagues in the Air Force would surely have told him. Told him that the policy he was calling for—the policy that President Johnson was denouncing—was already, in secretly, administration policy, Johnson's policy.

But Goldwater wasn't likely to reveal that. (Johnson must have counted on that, or he wouldn't have picked up the issue so prominently, or at all.) In the first place, he would be telling a secret, which, of course, he would never do as a model major general. Unless it served his interests and interests of the Air Force: like the secrets he was telling daily that purported to support his claims of U.S. military decline and inferiority (which I was helping Yarmolinsky refute). From the detailed charges he was making in the campaign -- misleading as they were--it was clear he was getting a lot of classified data from inside the

Pentagon. (Years later his speechwriter in '64, Karl Hess, told me that he used to drive Goldwater to assignments with General LeMay, then Air Force Chief of Staff, in places like supermarket parking lots, where LeMay would personally transfer to him bundles of top secret documents from the trunk of his private car. An implausible scene, which I can believe.)

The real reason he didn't expose this particular secret—in fact, he helped reinforce its secrecy, by allowing the president falsely to deny, without challenging him, that he had instituted a measure similar to the one his opponent was advancing—was that Goldwater agreed with the secret policy. Goldwater's board of military advisers was giving it legitimacy, for the first time in public discussion. But if the voters didn't warm to it and it contributed instead to his defeat (as happened), Goldwater and his advisers wanted the policy continued, in secret. It didn't serve their purposes to tell the truth about this. Better to pretend that this shared policy was one of the major differences between the two candidates that made Goldwater's campaign "A Choice, Not an Echo."

Exactly the same situation applied in the case of the second major issue in the campaign, U.S. escalation in Vietnam. Goldwater was calling for major bombing campaigns against North Vietnam and Laos. LBJ was rejecting this forcefully, saying over and over, "We seek no wider war." (Often with the mumbled proviso, unnoticed by all, "at this time." He meant, in fact, quite precisely "at this time, until right after the election is over.") LBJ had the popular side of the issue, by an overwhelming margin. Yet secretly, though he had not yet formally made a decision, he had authorized planning in the Pentagon which was virtually sure to lead to a bombing campaign different from Goldwater's only in

tactical design and initial scale. (As in the case of delegation, Goldwater's policy would have been even more extreme, though no different in principle). And Goldwater knew this, from his annual active duty in the Pentagon in 1964 as part of his reserve service. He acknowledged that in 1971 when the Pentagon Papers came out.

But he didn't reveal it during the campaign. When he was asked, in 1971, why he hadn't, he said, "Who would have believed me?" He was then, after all, only a U.S. Senator, the Republican candidate for President, a member of the Armed Services Committee and an Air Force reserve Major General. Who would have believed him, against the public word of the President?

The Pentagon Papers hadn't been published yet, exposing the secret plans at that very time for escalation. It would, indeed, have been hard for journalists or Congress or the public to believe, without documentary evidence, that a President was lying or misleading the public so spectacularly as such a revelation by Goldwater would have implied. That is, as spectacularly as Johnson was actually doing.

Without documentary evidence. But Goldwater had as good access as I ever did to the documents that were later published in the Pentagon Papers. He had access in the Pentagon during the spring of 1964, and he could have had the actual documents from General LeMay or others during the campaign, just like the secret data on strategic posture that he received and used in speeches. In effect, he could have put out the 1964 sections of the Pentagon Papers in 1964. (As I myself could and should have done, instead of doing it in 1971. I believe that would have prevented the Vietnam War, so I've come to hold myself gravely at fault for not doing that in 1964-65, or thinking of it.)

He published comparable secrets about the strategic balance because he hoped it

would get him elected. But wouldn't evidence of flagrant deception by the President also help get him elected? It might. But it might not, and this was a policy he wanted Johnson to carry out if he stayed in office. Revealing that it was Johnson's actual policy could cause a public reaction that would block that, just as Goldwater's similar policy was sinking his own campaign. That was why no one in the Air Force was revealing the secret preparations or giving the lie to Johnson's misleading campaign statements. Goldwater shared the same Air Force point of view. He would have gained no points with his Air Force friends if he had broken ranks on this and told the truth. Besides, he hoped his own position was more popular than Johnson's public position (though polls said otherwise), and he wasn't about to reveal that their policies were virtually the same. All of this applies identically to his proposals, and his silences, about delegation.

This explanation of why he didn't say more at the time is necessarily speculative. What is fact is that he knew about the escalation preparations concealed from the public and he didn't tell it. Likewise, his board of military supporters all knew for a fact the truth about delegation, and presumably told him. (In fact, they implied the truth for the first time in public—claiming baselessly that it was in danger of changing under Johnson—with the controversy leading to the very first leaks to major media about the delegation which the president and McNamara were denying.) Both Goldwater and Johnson encouraged the public to believe that they differed sharply on this policy, while both secretly knew that their policies differed only marginally. It's not clear whether Goldwater appreciated just how unpopular his policy was till the votes were counted, but LBJ understood that his own secret policy, only marginally different from Goldwater's, would be just as unpopular, which is why he kept it secret.

And I kept it secret, just as I did my knowledge that we heading for a major bombing campaign against North Vietnam, which I also opposed. (As Mort Sahl told audiences later, claiming that he had been too radical to vote for LBJ in 1964: “My liberal friends told me that if I didn’t vote for Johnson, we’d be bombing North Vietnam by spring. And they were right. I didn’t vote for Johnson, and we were bombing North Vietnam in spring.”) I participated in the hoax. Why? Well, first, telling secrets was not what I’d joined the government to do, and I’d promised many times that I wouldn’t. I didn’t have Goldwater’s experience in breaking that promise, so I didn’t even consider it (as I wish I had).

Moreover, if I had thought of it, I would have immediately dismissed it because it would support Goldwater’s campaign. I had no doubt that his election would be bad for the country. For one thing, the escalation he was proposing and would surely carry out—essentially the secret proposals of the Air Force and the Joint Chiefs of Staff—would be even worse, very significantly, than what my boss McNamara was urging on Johnson. He would not only bomb on a more ferocious scale, but expand the ground war into Laos, Cambodia and probably North Vietnam, bringing China into the war and leading to the probable use of nuclear weapons.

But it was obvious as the campaign progressed that there was no danger of Goldwater’s actually winning the election. Even my hypothetical revelations, damaging as they would have been to Johnson’s image and campaign, would not have changed that. After all, since the voters didn’t want escalation at all—the landslide in favor of Johnson’s false assurances demonstrated that—Goldwater would still have looked even worse. The

disclosures would just have lowered, dramatically, his margin of victory.

There would have been no landslide. The republic could live with that. There should have been impeachment, for Johnson's flagrant deception and flaunting of the Constitution. But that wouldn't have happened, either, with the Democratic Congress. The real, immeasurably important effect, I believe, would have been that Johnson could not have carried out his escalation, in either the McNamara or the JCS/Goldwater forms.

Not only the voters but the foreign policy leadership of the Democratic-controlled Senate—Senators Mansfield, Fulbright and Russell, along with many others—were resolutely against escalation and favored extrication. They had been fooled by Johnson (and all those who kept his secrets, including me) about his intentions as thoroughly as the public. That fall was the time, before the escalation had commenced, when it could have been stopped: and would have been, I believe, by anyone who had told the truth, with documents. Any one of a hundred or more insiders could have done that. Not one did.

Secrets can be kept very reliably, even when they are known to hundreds or thousands of insiders, even when many of those know they should not be kept because their secrecy wrongly endangers the lives of countless humans. (See the secret planning for the Iraq War; or on a still-larger scale of victims, the secrets of the tobacco industry. Zero whistleblowers in 2002 for the former, and for decades, zero for the latter, which led to more American deaths every year than all our wars together except for the Civil War.) This book is about many of the most dangerous of such secrets.

The fact that there are many authorized fingers on the American nuclear trigger remains, effectively, one of those secrets. More than half a century after Eisenhower's secret authorization, that reality has not entered into American consciousness. This persists

even though documentation of the earlier parts of this period, Eisenhower through Johnson, has at last surfaced—contradicting generations of denials and obfuscation—only a few years ago, through the efforts of the National Security Archive to get them declassified. Just how this phenomenon of public unawareness has been maintained deserves some accounting, not only because this instance is important in itself but because it reflects a recurrent process that maintains possibly fatal public ignorance about many other of the subjects of this book.